

**Today's Technology Meets the World of Tomorrow: A Review of the New York
Public Library's iPad App *Biblion: The Boundless Library*, 1939-1940 New York**

World's Fair Edition

Libby Bischof, University of Southern Maine

When the New York World's Fair ran from April of 1939 to October of 1940 in Corona, Queens, 45 million people strolled through the gates to marvel at the wonders of the "World of Tomorrow." As they wandered through the 1200 acre fairgrounds they might have: visited the General Motors Futurama ride, where they could experience and envision the possibilities of life in the distant 1960s, viewed the Westinghouse time capsule before it was sealed until 6039, admired the swimming and diving performances at Billy Rose's Aquacade, watched the animals frolic in Frank Buck's Jungleland, tasted new products in the Food Zone, or conducted a conversation with Elektro, Westinghouse's remarkable walking and talking robot. While we can no longer attend the World's Fair, the New York Public Library (NYPL) has presented to us the next best thing—a free iPad app entitled *Biblion: The Boundless Library*, where viewers can enter the library's vast collection of 1939-1940 New York World's Fair materials virtually. *Biblion* was originally the name of the New York Public Library's Bulletin, a richly illustrated magazine that presented highlights and scholarship drawn from the library's collections, published from 1992 to 2001. "The World of Tomorrow: Exploring the 1939-1940 World's Fair Collection," is the first issue of *Biblion's* rerelease in its new digital and highly interactive format. According to the NYPL's description, "*Biblion* tells stories in a new way, giving readers a visual pathway—or, really, many pathways—to

understanding the nearly infinite number of narratives The New York Public Library collects, treasures and preserves.”¹ For the NYPL, what makes this iPad app different from earlier formats of digitized archival materials is the fact that the information presented becomes more than the typical one-dimensional format where the next item is but one click away. The NYPL’s goal with this new presentation format was to provide readers “with countless serendipitous moments of discovery as you explore a world of information laid out like you’ve never seen before ... the World of Tomorrow.”² The release of the app during the spring of 2011 purposefully coincided with the NYPL’s “Find the Future” 2011 Centennial Celebration, a campaign, according to Paul LeClerc, President and CEO of the NYPL, to situate the 21st century NYPL as “the Library for the Future.”³ In a world where people are every day abandoning the physical for the virtual, especially in terms of books and print media, the launch of the campaign and the *Biblion* app seem a timely response and a necessary way for the historic NYPL to remain connected and relevant to patrons both physically and virtually, in New York and around the globe.

This innovative app, designed by Potion, an interaction design and technology firm, really highlights the capabilities and the functionality of Apple’s iPad. Users can scroll through scholarly essays on specific topics related to the fair, delve into the virtual stacks, enlarge and study photographs, and watch amateur films made during the World’s Fair. The presentation of the material, while at times a bit confusing, is also visually stunning. In some ways, the app is much like visiting

¹ “About the App,” *Biblion: The Boundless Library*.

² “About the App,” *Biblion: The Boundless Library*.

³ Paul LeClerc, “Welcome Letter,” *Biblion: The Boundless Library*.

a World's Fair—when you first enter the site, the visual and sensory information seems a bit overwhelming, but once you begin wandering, you stumble upon both the familiar and the strange, spending time in attractions that catch your interest, bypassing ones that do not. The menu screen divides the viewer's experience of the fair into seven themes: the "Introduction," "A Moment in Time," "Enter the World of Tomorrow," "Beacon of Idealism," "You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet," "From the Stacks," and "Fashion, Food and Famous Faces." From here, users select a theme, and either read a series of short scholarly essays, scroll through galleries of photographs, watch amateur films shot at the Fair, or listen to some of the sounds recorded at the Fair. A nice feature of the app is the share function, where users can email items from the collection to themselves or to a friend (the image of the item will appear in the email, as well as a link to the item), or post an object to Twitter or Facebook. For researchers using the app, the share function allows one to track and save objects of interest so they can be quickly returned to (there is also a bookmark function within the app itself). Because there is no search function built into the app, this method of saving items via email, Facebook, or Twitter would be quite useful for academics, researchers, and students who wish to make use of the app for functionality beyond entertainment.

Researchers who depend on the use of archives and special collections for the substance of their books, articles, documentaries and presentations are well aware of the "serendipitous moments of discovery" that can occur when browsing through a manuscript collection, a folder of photographs, or reels of old film.

Researchers also know, however, that such serendipity—that moment when you

find the exact piece of evidence you need, or when you discover a new item of interest previously unknown to you—is rare. When using this app, however, every new “discovery” feels a bit serendipitous, like you’ve stumbled into a corner of the Fair you may have heard about but never really believed that such a thing existed. Hence, the experience of using the app, particularly if one is in the mood for aimlessly wandering through a sea of fascinating material, is a pleasant and highly engaging one. Some users, however, may find the non-linear organization of the materials frustrating. If a user enters the App looking for a particular item, for instance, it could take him or her hours to find it. There is no “Search” function available (the app’s most serious flaw) and the multilinear web of materials, while interconnected, may confuse some users. It is important to keep in mind, however, that no digital archive can ever fully recreate the experience of visiting the actual archive where one can utilize an organized finding aid, hold the historic materials in one’s hands or search for that one crucial piece of evidence filed away somewhere in the stacks. In fact, while the app contains a staggering 700 separate pieces of archival material, ranging from postcards to official memos and silent films to photographs of the Aquacade, the actual 1939-1940 World’s Fair Records housed at the NYPL amount to ten tons of material stored in more than 2,500 boxes in the Manuscripts and Archives Division. As Ann Thornton of the NYPL’s Manuscripts and Archives staff remarks in her essay “What Remains: Preserving the Fair” located within the app, “The more than 2500 boxes that now house the rest of the records provide insights into many aspects of the Fair unavailable from other sources: there is no event, visit, meeting, incident, or transaction related to the Fair that is not

documented. Some of its contents are invaluable, and others are surprising.”⁴ To give readers a sense of the scope of the physical collection, the finding aid, a well-organized and incredibly detailed document completed by staff at the NYPL in 2008 (and available for download on the NYPL’s website), is more than 600 pages long.

Users of the App might also find it interesting that the launch issue of the *Biblion* app is not the first time the NYPL has innovated in terms of improved accessibility and content delivery with the 1939-1940 World’s Fair Collection. From 2006-2008, with the support of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Library staff created a searchable index of the names of 180,000 people and organizations that communicated with the Fair Corporation (found on the NYPL website) as well as scanned more than 13,000 images from the collection (available and searchable in the NYPL’s Digital Gallery).⁵ Thornton further noted that as a result of this 2006-2008 project, “the Fair records have been the most used collection in the [Manuscripts and Archives] Division.”⁶ What I do not think the average user of the App comprehends, is what a small portion of this vast collection of archival materials is actually on display within the confines of their iPad. My hope, while perhaps a bit naïve, is that *Biblion*, and other similar projects in the works, will encourage more people to patronize libraries, museums, archives and special collections so they can see, use, and celebrate these sorts of material in person.

⁴ Ann Thornton (with the Manuscript and Archives Staff), “What Remains: Preserving the Fair,” *Biblion: The Boundless Library*, Issue #1.

⁵ Thornton et. al., “What Remains: Preserving the Fair.”

⁶ Ibid.

The app, however, does serve as an important and engaging introduction to the history of the 1939-1940 New York World's Fair and the historical context of the era. The myriad essays are short, highly informative, and written for the general public. The archival materials and objects selected for inclusion in the app truly represent the vast array of materials that can be seen in person at the NYPL. Users can learn more about the introduction of new technology at the Fair or explore how the Fair Corporation organized the thousands of documents generated during the life of the Fair. Those interested in amateur films of the World's Fair would do well to locate the story "The Society of Amateur Filmmakers: H. Earl Hoover's Home Movies from the Fair," which features six fascinating clips of Hoover's 22 minute color film, which he donated to the NYPL after the Fair was over. This story can be accessed under the thematic cluster "From the Stacks: The Fair Comes to the NYPL."

In many ways, one of the most successful aspects of the app is its attempted democratization of the archives. For starters, in keeping with the mission of a public library, the app is free. Furthermore, while most laypeople do not regularly make a habit of venturing into their local library's special collections and rare books and manuscripts departments, this app successfully shows the average user why, in the future, they might want to pay these collections a visit in person. I believe that the app allows users a rare and consolidated glimpse into the varied types of materials housed in special collections stacks: photographs, film reels, letters, objects, newspapers, books, menus and other ephemera, all in the palm of their hand and accessible at the push of a button and a swipe of a finger 24 hours a day, seven days a week. As the creators noted in the first line of their introduction about how to use

the app, “With this app you are living in the World of Tomorrow that the planners of the 1939-1940 World’s Fair only dreamed about—using a device they would have found amazing.” Interested readers who do not own an iPad will be pleased to learn that the NYPL has made the majority of the content contained in the app accessible to all users on the library’s website. Visit

<http://exhibitions.nypl.org/biblion/worldsfair/> to browse through *Biblion*’s web interface. A note to the reader: while the *Biblion* app is visually stunning and remarkably innovative, the website is less so; if you can get a hold of an iPad for a few hours, the experience is well worth it.

In conclusion, it remains to be seen if the NYPL has created the Library--or, in this case, the Archive--of the Future with *Biblion*. The next time I teach my course on World’s Fairs and Exhibitions, I plan to set my History students loose with the app to see how easily they are able to utilize and navigate *Biblion*--not as entertainment, but as an educational tool for scholarly research. I wonder, however, how it will compare to an actual visit to the World’s Fairgrounds in Corona Park, Flushing Meadows, Queens, or to the New York Public Library itself. Will the expressions on their faces as they navigate through the app compare to the expressions of delight and wonder on the faces of my college students from Maine when I took them to the 1939-40 and 1964 New York World’s Fairgrounds in May of 2011? Somehow, I think not. But, until we can travel to New York and pay a visit to the Fairgrounds and the NYPL’s Manuscripts and Archives Division, *Biblion* is a welcome innovative and interactive substitute.